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(FHAANZ)**

Conference Panel Paper

Panel Topic:

Screen Based Practices in Contemporary Visual Art

Paper Title:

The Digital-Bricoleur: Contemporary Screen-based Visual art practices

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Abstract

This paper describes a practice-led methodology that combines contemporary art theory and processes, as well as concepts of fan studies to construct a space for the critical and creative exploration of screen culture. The research promotes new possibilities for purposeful creative engagements with the screen, framed through the lens of what I term the *digital-bricoleur*. This performative, link-making approach documents the complicit tendencies that arise out of my affective relationship with screen culture, mapping out a cultural terrain in which I can creatively and critically 'play'. The creative exploitation of this improvisational and aleatory activity then forms the creative research outputs. It appropriates and reconfigures content from screen culture, creating digital video installations aimed at engendering new experiences and critical interpretations of screen culture.

Introduction

(SLIDE 1 – Title slide)

This paper describes a practice-led research methodology which combines contemporary art theory and processes, as well as concepts of fan studies in order to define a space for the critical and creative exploration of screen culture.

(SLIDE 2 – Digital Bricolage)

The discussion draws upon Michel De Certeau's idea of bricolage and combines it with art curator/critic Nicolas Bourriaud's discussion of contemporary artist's *Postproduction* practices as a way to understand potentials for contemporary art making. This understanding is given critical context by examining theorist Joanna Drucker's discussion of artist's symbiotically complicit and critical engagements with culture, and Matt Hills' arguments about the scholarly activity of fans. The contextualisation and analysis of the quotidian watching, reading, and web-surfing of one's way through the cultural landscape describes an activity I term *digital-bricolage*. The articulation of this activity is intended to express its methodological value as crucially generative for creative and critical art practices. It describes the way that artists can and do actively navigate and co-opt the elements and structures of screen culture as a way to construct new meanings and experiences from within that same culture.

De Certeau's bricoleur

(SLIDE 3 – De Certeau's bricoleur)

The first part of this methodology stems from Michel de Certeau's text *The practice of everyday life*, and indeed, primarily this methodology identifies the creative potential within already existing contemporary activities – namely how I navigate and read various kinds of screen culture both off and online. In this reading, am interested in operating according to de Certeau's definition of the activity of bricolage: as a poetic way of 'making do' (1984, xv). As I understand

and use it, bricolage is the exploratory act of piecing together pre-existing and varied elements from one's immediate culture rather than 'engineering' new forms from the ground up. The resulting bricolage constructs new meanings and forms from disparate symbolic meanings to generate new or novel juxtapositions. The figure of the bricoleur describes how I engage with all kinds of screen culture; an idiosyncratic or even aleatoric approach to watching films and television, combined with (perhaps) weird and wide-ranging reading and watching of online content as a way to begin making new artworks. My creative practice attempts to piece together fragments and experiences of these off and online texts together in formal or material ways in order to discover new and unexpected potentials. By working from the point of view of the bricoleur, I want to *performatively* play with the sources – selectively removing elements from their familiar pop cultural surroundings and exploring not just the existing “network of differences and references that give them a textual structure”, but also then how these images and sounds can be re-imagined (Derrida in Brunette & Wills 1994, 15). I am interested in how this ‘poetic’ approach results in unpredictable and fascinating creative forms. What I find appealing about this strategy for composing artwork is that it allows me to play with screen culture in an improvised way, and this enhances the potential to reconfigure existing signs in original ways. It allows the processes of collage and montage (as aleatory devices and as *visual languages*) to become more formally active in assembling and editing work – rather than being focussed on the cultural, political or social significance of the material used.

Postproduction

(SLIDE 4 – Bourriaud's Postproduction)

The methodology I am describing is also given important context by contemporary art curator/critic/theorist Nicolas Bourriaud's idea of *Postproduction* artists. By this he describes not the post-shooting period of film and television making, but instead a way of art-making that “invent[s] paths through culture” (2002, 12), one that is conceptually ‘post’ traditional ideas of

producing 'original' works of art, and beyond Modernist avant-gardist oppositional critique. Bourriaud describes a way of engaging with screens culture that becomes an informed play with existing cultural artefacts (2002, 57); a careful navigation across the different spaces and forms of popular culture. Further, he maintains that the creative recontextualising and remaking of these cultural forms opens them up to social, economic and political critique by creating new understandings:

Postproduction artists invent new uses for works, including audio or visual forms of the past, within their own constructions. But they also re-edit historical or ideological narratives, inserting the elements that compose them into alternative scenarios. (2002, 45)

Similar to De Certeau, Bourriaud describes contemporary artists as sensitive to the symbolic significances that screen-based culture generates both on and off the internet. In their self-guided navigation of screen culture, these artists are consumers given agency – they “surf on a network of signs... insert[ing] our forms on existing lines” (2002, 13). Artists working this way construct new symbolic relationships between physical and screen-based spaces by surfing through, and along, these sites, and by making innovative connections between them. The new interpretations of these symbolic relationships become artworks (forms) that are re-combined back into this network of signs as a kind of feedback loop between art and pop culture. This process of referencing, restructuring, emphasising or re-imagining existing content and/or contexts engages with the political dimensions and systems of cultural production by scrambling the “boundaries between consumption and production” (2002, 13). In its outcomes, the resulting artworks, it creates new forms of knowledge and ways for thinking about this network.

Digital-bricoleur

(SLIDE 5 – Digital-bricolage)

These two contexts are crucial in framing my creative methodology. In combining their ideas and attitudes towards screen culture and cultural

production, I have adopted the term of the *digital-bricoleur* as a way to describe this activity. The digital-bricoleur is an interpretive agent who makes informed connections between cultural forms: from the pieces of a film to be edited together, the narrative connections uncovered in disparate Wikipedia entries, or even the formal choice and arrangements of objects or images to be displayed. It is a connective process that links together concepts and forms in order to develop a greater critical awareness and understanding of their symbolic potential. The methodology of the digital-bricoleur is an ongoing process of poetic and analytical link-making which in turn, enables a closer, more 'nuanced', reading of the social, political and cultural phenomena and contexts of screen culture.

Complicity and Criticality

Postproduction practices also inform and give shape to the idea of how exactly I as an artist can engage critically with screen culture. While I am an avowed fan of various films, television programs, and even blogs/websites, in traditional conceptions of criticality, such fandom, and thus the creative practice methodology that stems from it, isn't afforded critical intent. In *Sweet Dreams: criticality and complicity in contemporary art practice* (2005) Joanna Drucker examines the practices of artists who negotiate this kind of relationship between popular culture and art in a particular manner:

[A]rtists in large part are working in recognition of their relations of compromise and contradiction, their more self-consciously positive – or nuanced and complex – engagements with the culture industry.
(2005, 8)

These artists, and myself, acknowledge a positive engagement with the pop culture forms that they reference in their art practices while also presenting critical perspectives on them. Drucker argues that it is through this complicated and complicit relationship with the 'cultural industries' that new immersive spaces are established. Such spaces, she contends, enable these artists to effectively analyse the complexity of the cultural forms with which they are

engaged. For me, the figure of the digital-bricoleur occupies a similar place between historically competing cultural systems without the constraints of adhering to any particular position.

Fandom and scholarship

Speaking of, and as, a fan of various forms of screen culture, it is crucial to identify the overlap with fan studies theory that this methodology fosters, and which further grounds the critical potential in my complicit screen consumption. Building upon earlier fan studies writes like Henry Jenkins, media and cultural studies theorist Matt Hills has been central to this methodology. His analysis of fandom is based on a transmedia idea of a fan's consumption (2002, 2). He argues that fans that participate in a wide-ranging and avid consumption of media culture, particularly through screen-based culture, enact "a form of cultural creativity" (2002, 90). Analogous to De Certeau's bricoalge, and Bourriad's description of postproduction, this idea also underscores Drucker's notion of complicity criticality.

(SLIDE 6 – Hills' Fan Cultures)

Hills' work theorises fandom by addressing the tensions he sees between academia and fandom. He uses the twin terms of 'scholar-fan' and 'fan-scholar' to address the complicated mix of critical objectivity and fannish complicity that many academics and artists (like myself) need to negotiate. Hills argues for scholars to admit to the subjective or fannish aspects of their institutional investments. He sees academia as an institutionally sanctioned system of intellectuals, writers and educators who lay claim to an idea of objectivity and 'rational discourse' in their intellectual pursuits (2002, 4). But that in actuality the same compulsions and practices of fans are also present in academia's 'cultish' adherence to schools and figures of thought. He plainly identifies such choices of theoretical discourse are still personal and subjective behaviours. The reassessment of these old binaries is one that can better inform both fields.

Academics are not resolutely rational, nor are fans resolutely immersed. Academic knowledge is not always meaningfully 'testable', nor is fan knowledge always 'informal' or 'experiential'.
(2002, 21)

Hills dispenses with the simplistic dualism of fandom and academic, and, instead, embraces the complexities of spaces that traverse both positions (2002, 7). He describes these two seemingly incompatible engagements with culture as forming a “dialectic of value” (2002, 81). This conflation stresses the “essentially contradictory process” of fandom (2002, 144), which if embraced can better serve both approaches in their respective examinations of culture. It is in this space of contradiction that this methodology operates – enacting this dialectic through digital-bricolage. For me, rather than ‘scholar-fan’, this process operates across the spaces of ‘artist-fan’ and ‘fan-artist’ in order to explore the critical and creative potential of this activity.

Methodology of practice

(SLIDE 7 – Link-making)

In a practical sense, this digital-bricolage methodology takes the form of a *link-making* strategy. Like many of Bourriaud’s postproduction artist-exemplars, this link-making strategy of my practice is one that, while not necessarily evident in the creative outcomes, is fundamental to my art-making processes and the ability of the practice to create new forms, ideas and experiences. It has developed out of the connections I make from surfing the internet’s seemingly infinite breadth and scope of data, forms and signs. As Bourriaud suggests, I also use search engines as a way to create unique pathways across this network and then ‘map’ the information from these nomadic excursions into ever growing archives. Using curated music playlists as an example, he argues that the act of choice can become a creative practice in and of itself, and that

to listen to records becomes work in itself, which diminishes the
dividing line between reception and practice, producing new

cartographies of knowledge. (2002, 13)

This idea (and a YouTube playlist, carefully formulated RSS feed, or a Tumblr account, etc., could be easily substituted for music playlists) of ‘cultural curation’ as an act of *link-making* is important because it helps map new ‘cartographies’ – new maps for seeing what these connections might develop into. In the case of my practice, this could be as simple as watching one linked video on YouTube after the next; **(SLIDE 8 – *Jurassic Park YouTube*)** as obsessive (and linear) as poring over every page of *Vanity Fair* magazine; **(SLIDE 9 – *Google Image search*)** as idiosyncratic as watching, listening to and simultaneously interacting with multiple streams of video, television, music or video gaming; **(SLIDE 10 – *GIF's*)** or as speculative as reading and ‘chaining’ related link after related link in Wikipedia. **(SLIDE 11 – *Wikipedia chain*)** These habitual excursions into popular culture and the internet *are* the origins of practice that form this methodology, and which in turn creates playful, creative and critical knowledge as artworks.

As an example, I want to lay out a small part of the map of practice (a tracing of the links made) involved in creating the work *Untitled (after Steven and John)*. **(SLIDE 12 – *Link-making diagram - Robopocalypse*)** The genesis of this work developed out of my at-the-time-obsessive-daily reading of RSS feeds from various entertainment industry blogs. This led to a news article about Steven Spielberg’s then-upcoming film *Robopocalypse*. This then prompted me to search for and watch a YouTube clip from his film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* – as I recalled from previous viewings that there was an overlap in subject matter – and as a way to remember a favourite scene. **(SLIDE 13 – *Link-making diagram – A.I.*)** Re-watching this prompted me to read the Wikipedia article about the film, which discusses Stanley Kubrick’s involvement in its development. Kubrick abandoned the project to make *Eyes Wide Shut*, and this led me to watching YouTube videos of clips from that film – which in turn led to my Googling and finding on-set production and promotion photographs from this film. **(SLIDE 14 – *Link-making diagram – Cruise/Kidman*)** This search yielded a particularly

disquieting Time magazine cover photograph of a naked (and robotic looking) Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman, which I then archived for appropriation in another on-going artwork. **(SLIDE 15 – Link-making diagram – Kubrick Archive)** Following a link to Kubrick's main Wikipedia entry also sent me on a tangential trajectory that involved uncovering and archiving textual and photographic information about the director, and the production of some of his other films. This tangent has since bloomed and blossomed into other projects altogether which so far have included research trips to the real, off-line world of the Kubrick archives in London to continue link-making.

In reflecting on the various connections between Tom Cruise, Kubrick, Spielberg and A.I., I remembered a previously watched on-line video essay from a screen-studies blog that included all these elements. **(SLIDE 16 – Link-making diagram – Spielberg face)** It focused on Spielberg's use of the cinematic close-up, which I also understood to be connected to another recently-read blog post by film theorist David Bordwell on the close-up, shot length, and intensified continuity. In response, this chance-based overlap of ideas, forms and material, compelled me to play with the close-up faces in digital compositing (read: bricolage) software, via the basic super-imposition of simple shapes. After some experimentation I began to see a connection between my at-the-time instinctual use of superimposition, with John Baldessari's collages of dots-over-faces. **(SLIDE 17 – Link-making diagram – Baldessari)** Once I became conscious of this influence, a basic survey through Google image search meant I was then able to reference Baldessari's common colour choices, and the work resolved itself into a sort of homage to both Spielberg and Baldessari; hence the work's title. **(SLIDE 18 – Link-making diagram – Untitled (after Steven and John) screenshots)** Similarly, the sound was created by my now explicit awareness of my influences. I employed the sustained soundtrack-music cue to reference the 'intensification' that Bordwell had identified as a dominant Hollywood filmmaking trend, of which Spielberg is an expert practitioner.

(SLIDE 19 – Link-making diagram – Untitled (after Steven and John) video)

(SLIDE 20 – Digital-bricolage)

This example emphasises the primacy of a link-making methodology in contemporary screen art practice. Importantly, it also highlights the efficacy of the process in continuing to generate numerous new tangents for the practice to explore. While this convoluted process is not evident in the finished work, it is a crucial strategy for me to act out in order to create such a work. As with Bourriaud's ideas, this apparently simple idiosyncratic and speculative link-making approach to practice – one entirely enabled by the internet – is essential for me to develop new 'cartographies' that can engender new creative outcomes, experiences, ideas, and knowledge.

(SLIDE 21 – Rhizome)

It is also important to point out there that this methodology affords a great deal of agency as well as responsibility to myself as an artist-scholar-fan. Not only is the process continually in flux, it is constantly concerned with mapping, generating, archiving, exploring, and playing with what theorist Jacques Rancière would refer to as a "topography of possibilities" (quoted in Carnevale and Kelsey 2007, 257). As a practitioner, enacting this process requires continual and imaginative attention to be paid to the rhizomatic activity underway. Digital-bricolage requires the practitioner to recognise the various waypoints/landmarks/nodes they are linking between, planting flags (archiving) those moments/materials/ideas while also moving on to forge other links as well. An effective creative and generative use of the methodology also requires a reflective and reflexive period where the practitioner can become explicitly aware of this topography as a way to re-link back between previously overlooked landmarks and connections.

Finally, it is important to note that the agency that this activity allows forms part of its critical dimensions. Rancière describes it as *dissensus*, a critical action that “modif[ies]... the coordinates of the sensible” (quoted in Carnevale and Kelsey 2007, 259); it remakes the cultural terrain “connect[ing] and disconnect[ing] different areas, regions, identities, functions, and capacities existing in the configuration of a given experience” (1999, 40). Looking ahead to further refinement of this methodology, I would argue that this kind of un-checked, free-reign, chance-based, speculative approach to navigating and re-making culture is of increasing importance in a time where the internet is perhaps being ‘re-walled’ into walled-garden-apps, opaquely algorithmic Facebook news feeds or AI-based-news-aggregation. That fostering a process where Spielberg can be imaginatively connected to Baldessari, or (as I have more recently found) Jerry Seinfeld and Cary Grant can be used as a way to experientially understand Nietzschean thought, is an increasingly important practice.

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